[George Mehales]

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DISTRICT NO. 4

SPARTANBURG, S. C.

ROBERT V. WILLIAMS

GEORGE MEHALES

THE DIXIE LUNCH

EAST MAIN STREET

SPARTANBURG, S. C. GEORGE MEHALES

On January 14, 1892, Penelope Mehales gave birth to her sixth son in the ancient town of Athens, Greece. Because she had once been to America, and because she believed her sons would find a much brighter future in the United States than in her native country, she gave her new-born child the popular English name of “George,” not at all realizing that this name, like her baby, was of Greek origin and meant “farmer.” The family was poor, and George's father had died two months before he was born, but the mother was determined that her boys should come to America. She sold what little property she had; borrowed money from her kinfolks, and sent George, when he was but three years old, along with his brother, who was sixteen, to New York.

The two Greek boys were taken in charge by an uncle who had come to America several years before and who operated a small restaurant in Brooklyn. Louis, the older of the two boys, immediately went to work for his uncle. George was sent to school when he was six years old, attending the public school during the morning and the Greek school during the afternoon. In spare moments, he helped his brother and his uncle in the restaurant.

George finished high school in 1909 and went to work 2 for Stove Bekettas, who had purchased his uncle's restaurant. The death of his mother in Greece, and the fact that four of his brothers were ill with tuberculosis and unable to work, caused him to return to his native country. There, for a while, he engaged in farming, thus literally justifying his name. Later, he became a teacher.

“We had only a few schools in Greece where English was taught.” George said. “At that time there were many Greeks who planned to come to this country. The immigration laws were not so strict in those days. Most everybody who had enough money for their boat passage could get into the United States. Some of these people wanted to learn to speak English. I earned enough by teaching English to some of these people to take care of myself and my sick brothers. My uncle and brother in Brooklyn sent me money to help out. At last, I had enough money to care for my brothers for a while, and I came back to America.

“In New York, an old friend and I put our money together and opened up a restaurant. We bit off more than we could chew. (George's English shows a mastery of colloquialisms but has many indications of his foreign origin in its inflections and phrases). We couldn't pay for the expensive fixtures we bought. In three months we were broke and had to close our place. I found myself with no money and no job. Some friends get me a job in a Greek school. I had only twenty pupils. I taught Creek to Greek children who had been born in this country. I didn't make much money, but I managed to save a little and to send a little to my brothers.

“Nothing much else happened to me till the War. I enlisted in New York and came to Spartanburg with the 27th Division.

3

When I enlisted, the officer told me I would be used as an interpreter. He said there were a lot of Greeks in the division who didn't understand English. When we got to Camp Wadsworth, they put me to cooking in Company “C”, 100th Infantry, and there wasn't a Greek in the whole company. I was never used as an interpreter.

“Do you remember that big snow we had when the camp was here? I don't remember the exact date, but anyhow, I slipped on the snow and fell from the back of the mess shack. I broke my ankle. It was a bad break. They took me to the hospital and operated. They took

tow bones out of my foot. Then they told me I could never walk again without limping. Six long weeks I stayed in the hospital."

Apparently, George's experience with his broken ankle is one of the outstanding experiences of his life. When he discusses it, he seems to a slough off his acquired shell of correct English, and begin to speak in the broken English so common with the majority of Greeks today.

"The officers came around see me," George continued. "They say I can get honorable discharge. I don't want to go. I beg them let me stay when I get well. Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr., comes to the hospital. I tell my troubles, and he goes to see his father, Colonel Vanderbilt. Two or three days, officers tell me I can stay after doctors let me out of hospital.

"I went back mess shack on crutches. They told me I didn't have to go back yet. I wanted to. I sit in the kitchen and supervised all cooking. Meats, pies, everything. Soon word starts around that we move out any day for Frances. I was still crippled. I want to go with the boys, but Captain Cline tells 4 me I can't go. The boys in the company hear I can't go. They sign paper asking officers let me go with them and do the cooking. I go back to hospital for another examination, but thy say its it's no use. It almost breaks my heart to see the boys go. I cried lots."

When the 27th Division left for France, George remained behind. He does not like to discuss the period of his war record. He had formed friendships with many men in the company, many of whom lost their lives when the 27th and 30th Divisions crashed through the Hindenburg Line.

"After the boys left," George said, "I went back to the mess shack on crutches. I got rid of them as soon as possible. I went to this officer and that officer and asked them what company I was to work with. They said they would take it up with headquarters, but I guess they were too busy with other things because nothing happened. For about two

months, I was just loafing around. I slept on a cot in my old mess shack. I folded it up every morning and packed it away. I ate with the new men that came in. They were from Indiana and belonged to the 91st Division. They were swell fellows.

“By this time, I could walk almost without a limp. My pay stopped coming. The captain told me to go to headquarters to see about it. I hung around there about three days before I could get any attention. Then an officer heard my story. He told me to go back to my mess shack and stay there until something was done. I went back and began to work in the kitchen. The boys liked to have me there because it made less work for them. Inspection day came along, and the officers wanted to know what I was doing there. They 5 said my name was not on the company list. For about the hundredth time, I told my story. About a week later, some officer came in the mess shack and told me to go with him to headquarters. When I got there, some officers told me that a mistake had been made in the records. They said that the records showed I had been discharged about two months before. They told me that the papers had got lost somehow. They had the doctors at the hospital look me over again. Then they shoved a lot of papers at me to sign. I don't know much what was in them but I didn't care. I was glad that somebody was paying some attention to me. They told me to go back to the mess shack and start to work. A few days after that, Captain Johnson came in and told me that I had been assigned to the company. On top of that, I got paid for the two months, and did that money look good. I guess for these two months, I was just [last?] to the United States Army.

“Armistice Day was a great day at the camp. Our company had not used up its allotment of food for the period. The quartermaster decided to put on a spread. He went to Spartanburg and bough turkeys. It took us all day, even with an extra detail, to get ready. But we had a small dinner that night.”

After his discharge from the army, George found himself, like many other soldiers, without a job. For a while he worked in a restaurant owned by his brother, who had not gone to war, and who had profited during the period when some men amassed fortunes.

“My brother and I decided that it would be necessary for one of us to go to Greece to look after the property that Uncle Louis had left us. My brother said I was freer to go than he was. The trip was my second trip home. I was lucky to get it because the immigration officials told me I would have a hard time getting back. When they found out I was an American citizen and that I served during the war, I didn't have any trouble at all. I stayed in Greece about three months, and then came back here.

“I stayed in New York for a while, and then came back to Spartanburg. I had always wanted to come back here. I lived here with some Greek friends for a while. I took up school teaching again while I was looking around for something better. Two of my brothers in Greece died within ten days of each other. They left me about three hundred dollars in American money.

“What did you do with the money,” I asked him.

“Tell you, Bob, it was like this. I found an owner of a small restaurant here - not mentioning any names - that needed some capital. With what I had and what I borrowed from my brother, I went into business with him. Our business jumped up fast, and we had to hire extra people to take care of the trade. We were open day and night. Then his wife became sick - or should I say ill? She had the same disease that killed my brothers. He decided to take her to Arizona for her health, and he wanted to sell out to me. I bought it and was broke in less than six months. I couldn't get it out of my head that I wanted the best restaurant fixtures that money could buy. I was making good money but it wasn't enough to meet the expense of my new fixtures. And I was 7 also playing the stock market. One day, one of my customers showed me how much money he was making in the market. I had never even thought about the stock market before. For a few days, I looked at the market page in the newspaper. It looked good to me, and I bit with what you folks call 'hook, line and sinker.' All the money I took in, I put into stocks. The first day of October in 1929 made me feel like I was rich. The stocks I bought had gone up and up. I sold some

of them and bought others. I often thought about what my mother had said and that was “You'll get rich in America someday!' I should have paid for my fixtures, but I figured I could pay them any time. You might think I would have known better, but I didn't. I figured I could pay my debts any time, and I just let them ride.

“Trouble hit me hard during the last day of October of that year. I had become so interested with the market that I let my own business go down. I wasn't there half the time. I need my own place of business as a place to hang around in. Business dropped off, but I didn't care “cause I was making plenty money in the market.

“During the last days of October, my stocks began to drop. I was gambling on the margin. My brother called me and told me I would have to put up more cash. I went to the bank and put up all the cash I had in the bank with my brother. It seemed to me that things would sonn get better. I sent a telegram to my brother and he sent me one thousand dollars. I had about five thousand dollars invested. On that day of October 29, they told me I needed more 8 cash to cover up. I couldn't get it. I was wiped out that day.

“I guess disappointment comes mighty hard to some people, but that almost killed me. My brother lost in the market like me, and he couldn't help me out. I considered killing myself, 'cause I had nothing left. I found out what a fool I had been. I did manage to pay my debts by selling my cafe at rock bottom prices. I learned a lesson then. It almost killed me to see my cafe go at such a cheap price. It taught me that you've got to pay your debts to get along.

“Not long after my cafe was sold, I met a nice Greek girl named Penelope. Same as that of my mother. We kinda seemed what you call matched for each other. She lived in Charlotte and came here to see her brother when I met her. We started to going together. We decided to get married but I didn't have much to get married on. We got married anyhow and struggled along on almost nothing. The 'flu' took her after we had been together about six months. The doctor said it was 'flu' but I think it was pneumonia. Talk about committing

suicide, I felt like it then sure enough. Just before she died, she asked me to look out for her brother. He was always getting into some kind of trouble. His name was Nck. He lived with us. I got [him?] a job in Greenville. He stole some money from Gus Trakas when he was working there. I told Gus I would pay everything back if he wouldn't have him arrested. Cus turned Nick over to me. I sent him to Greenville and he made good there. Owns a small interest in one of the best restaurants in that town. He paid me back every cent I ever spent on him.

9

“The rest of my life - there's nothing much to it. I have been working and saving my money. I own an interest in this cafe. I'm pretty well fixed and I seem to have a lot of friends and I happy here.”

[Georgia?] spending most of his spare time is reading such magazines as Time, Readers' Digest, etc., but his favorite magazine is Asia, because he says he often finds in it articles concerning his native country.

He has many interesting stories to tell of his experiences in the restaurant business, but his favorite one is what he calls the “Tramp Mark.”

“One day a few years ago,” George said,” a tramp came into my place and wanted something to eat. He said he had not anything to eat for three days. He said he would wash the dishes or do anything I wanted him to do if I would give him something to eat. I gave him a meal and some small change I had in my pocket. The next day, about six men came in with hard luck stories. Every day after that, a bunch of men would come in and ask for something to eat. I told a friend one day that I couldn't figure out where all the hoboes were coming from. He said I must have a “Tramp Mark” on my building. I had never heard of a “Tramp Mark” before. He said that when hoboes found a place where they could get a meal for nothing, they would put a mark on the building so that other tramps would know that the place was a place to get a free meal. I went back to my place

and looked around. On the back door, I found the mark. It was a circle that 10 somebody had put there in chalk. It was about as big around as a saucer, and it had something in it like a cross. I rubbed it out. From then on, I looked over the building every day to see if there was any marks. Those hoboes had about eat me out of a place of business. There was a lot of hoboes then. Don't find so many now."

"Which do you find the hardest to please, George, men or women?"

"What you call the average man," George replied, 'isn't so particular. He'll pick up the menu, glance at it a second or so, and then say, 'Give me a roast beef dinner,' or something like that. He never tells you what vegetables he wants to go along with his dinner. That's the average man, but there are some like old maids that want everything just so and so.

"Take the average woman, now. She studied the menu a long time before she orders anything. Then she will say just what vegetables she wants. Women eat less than men, and a lot of them sill order some kind of a sandwich instead of a regular meal."

George believes that Americans would greatly improve their health if they would be more careful about their diet and would eat more slowly.

"Seems like most Americans eat just because they have to," George said. "Eating should be a pleasure and not just something you have to do. Men rush in, order something, and gobble down their food. It takes them about five minutes to eat. Everybody should take at least a half hour to eat. They always say they are 11 in a hurry. Well, they may be in a hurry but they are just hurrying to the grave when they gobble down their food."

George is pessimistic about the future of his native country, although he says Greece is in far better financial condition today than any other country.

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“There is no unemployment in Greece,” George said, “and everybody would be happy over there if the rest of the world would leave them alone. But they are all scared of Hitler. He's heading that way, and the Greeks think it won't be long before he takes over the Balkan states, and then he will want Greece. Nobody has stopped him yet in anything he wants, and the Greeks believe he wants Greece. Then they thin he will take Egypt and move on to India. They think he's trying to form a world empire.

“That may sound what you call 'far-fetched' to people over here,” George continued,” but they believe it will happen unless somebody stops Hitler. The Germans and Greek hat each other. Greece can't stop Germany by herself. Italy don't like Greece. Roumania don't like Greece. And you know from history what the Turks think about Greece. The Greek's best friends are the English and the Americans. They might help out if the Greeks get in danger, but there is no promise of help. That's why they worry so much.”

If a stranger went into George's restaurant today, he would probably find him in the kitchen, supervising the cooking. During the morning he busies himself in the kitchen and making the necessary purchases of food. At noon, he comes out of the kitchen 12 in a clean white uniform and a round white cap to talk with his customers. At two o'clock in the afternoon, he leaves his restaurant to take his “siesta.”

“In Greece,” George said, “everybody stops work from twelve till two. It is why you folks say is an old Spanish custom. I have to take mine from two till four. I spend that time in resting and reading. The hours I like most are at night. I go back to work at seven and work till nine. People are through with their work and in no big hurry. They like to sit around and talk, and that suits me fine. I talk too much, I know, because I learn more from listening than from talking.”

About nine o'clock, George turns over in restaurant to the night shift. The he invariably goes to his room and reads, retiring, he says, about eleven o'clock each night with his alarm clock set at seven the next morning.

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“George,” I asked him, “I have always heard the expression that “The Greeks had a word for it.' Do you know the origin of that saying?”

“I don't, Bob,” George laughingly replied, “but I can tell you this. As for me, and for thousands of other Greeks who are happy here, I'd say that that word is 'The United States.'”

[George Mehales] http://www.loc.gov/resource/wpalh3.32030213